

NEWS

Government announces end of NHS IT programme—for second time

Michael Cross

London

For the second time in a year the UK government has announced the end of the £12bn (€13.7bn; \$18.5bn) programme to computerise the NHS in England.

However, the announcement offers no detail on how the Department of Health will extricate itself from troubled information technology (IT) contracts. It also implies that large parts of the programme will remain intact.

In a statement apparently leaked to daily newspapers the department said that the government “had announced an acceleration of the dismantling” of the NHS National Programme for IT. It noted that the programme “was created in 2002 under the last government” and that a review by the Cabinet Office’s new Major Projects Authority had concluded that the programme is “not fit to provide the modern IT services that the NHS needs.”

The review was launched after a devastating report by the National Audit Office into the most troubled aspect of the national programme, the long delayed effort to create electronic patients’ records in acute units (*BMJ* 2011;342:d3125, 17 May, doi:10.1136/bmj.d3125).

But the government had already announced, in September 2010, that the programme’s “centralised national approach is no longer required” (*BMJ* 2010;341:c4988, doi:10.1136/bmj.c4988).

This week’s statement, made on the eve of the Labour Party conference, seems to reflect political frustration at the lack of progress. The main new development is that control of the project has moved from a health department board to the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for central government’s IT policy. Francis Maude, the Cabinet Office minister, said, “We now need to move faster to push power to the NHS frontline and get the best value for taxpayers’ money.”

However, the statement also said that the review had identified “substantial achievements” in many parts of the programme. These include the central data spine, the Choose and Book electronic booking service; the secondary uses service for extracting research and management data from patients’ records; and the picture archiving and communications service’s electronic imaging project. These central infrastructure elements, along with summary care records available throughout the NHS,

are likely to be preserved under a new IT strategy expected to be announced in November.

The new statement contains no update on the most problematic elements of the national programme, the so called “local service provider” contracts to install standard systems across large geographical regions. The health department is still trying to renegotiate contracts worth nearly £3bn with the supplier Computer Sciences Corporation and to resolve a £700m dispute with Fujitsu, whose contract was terminated in 2008. The *Financial Times* reported this week that the Fujitsu dispute is set to go to court (www.ft.com, 22 Sep, “Fujitsu and health department to meet in court”).

Observers dismissed the government’s announcement as a political stunt containing little new. Tola Sargeant, of TechMarketView, a specialist analyst, said, “We’re really no closer to knowing whether the Department of Health will be brave and cancel the LSPs’ [local service providers’] contracts or merely [further] limit their scope in some way . . . I’d put my money on the latter, but politics plays a big part here—it’s no coincidence it’s party conference season—and anything is possible.”

NHS IT insiders expressed frustration at the relentless criticism of the programme. Speaking at a King’s Fund event, Peter Dyke, head of industry liaison at the IT agency NHS Connecting for Health, compared the “instant gratification” expected from IT projects with the time needed to bring a new drug to market. “We’re still only seven or eight years into the [NHS National Programme for IT]. There’s a lot of things going in the right direction.”

However, the *Daily Mail* commented that the programme would “go down in history as the most egregious of the countless examples of the last Labour government’s incompetence and waste” (<http://bit.ly/nGW26O>).

bmj.com Feature: There IT goes again (*BMJ* 2011;343:d5317, doi:10.1136/bmj.d5317)

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2011;343:d6125

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2011

Proposed changes to the National Programme for IT in England*Infrastructure components likely to survive:*

- The national "spine," connecting all NHS units to:
- Summary care records
- Choose and Book
- Electronic prescribing service

Other national components expected to remain:

- Secondary uses service, which extracts anonymised data for research and commissioning
- Picture archiving and communications service

New infrastructure components expected to be announced:

- Finance spine

Components likely to be phased out:

- NHS Connecting for Health (the central IT agency)
- Local service provider contracts to supply standard electronic patient records to acute hospitals in geographical regions:
 - Northwest England and West Midlands (contractor: Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC))
 - Northeast England (CSC)
 - East England (CSC)
 - London (BT)

Components whose future is uncertain:

- N3 (NHS data network) (BT)
- NHSmail (email) (BT)